

“Want To Go For a Ride?”

By Diane Sullivan

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If this phrase strikes fear in your dogs, you should help them to get over it. Let's face it, at some point in time, usually when you are going to the vet, your dog will need to ride in the car. It's so much nicer to have a dog ride calmly in the car rather than to be sick or act like a crazed beast.

The first thing I ask my clients is, “Do you take the dog in the car only when going to the vet's office?” If the answer is yes, then I tell them not to let that be the only time your dog rides in the car. Can you imagine your dog

only thinking that the only time they go for a ride is when they're going to the vet's office, where something unpleasant is bound to be waiting for them?

If you don't have a new puppy between the ages of 8-12 weeks, this desensitization to the car may take a little longer, but otherwise make sure you take your puppy everywhere you go whenever you can. Whether it's running to the store, dry cleaners or the bank, take the puppy or dog along; they'll enjoy the company and scenery and they'll come to know it as a great treat.

I classify car riders two ways - those that are sick/afraid, and those who are overly excited. I put sick/afraid together because they go hand in hand. A dog that gets physically sick learns to fear the car. Also, dogs that are afraid of the car can make themselves feel sick just thinking about that. In the overexcited groups, there can be either the fear/aggressive component, which is not so much fear of the car and motion, but of the sensory input they see coming at them at dizzying speeds.

If your dog is loose in the car, it may be quieter if you put it in some kind of a crate or carrier. Just like with people, please make sure your dog is secured somehow in the vehicle, even if it is not in a crate or carrier.

Here are tips for dogs that are sick/afraid of the “big bad car”:

1. Try coaxing the dog or puppy into the car with soft tasty treats or a favorite toy. Do this BEFORE you start the car.
2. Plan on spending five to 15 minutes in the car (before starting it) with your dog the car for the first 3-4 days. Pet your dog, play with your dog, and give it a treat while in your driveway or garage. After that is done, take them out of the car and praise them.

3. Once you see some progress with the car not running, start the car and repeat those steps for another two or three days.
4. Now that your puppy or dog is getting into the car easily when the car is off as well as on, back out of your garage or driveway and go down to the end of the block, turn around and go home. Get them out of the car and praise them emphatically. Do this again for 4-5 days or until they seem all right with these short trips.
5. When you feel that your dog or puppy is more comfortable being in the car for these short little trips, a good idea would be to go to your vet's office simply to weigh them or have them just walk around. Make sure you bring soft treats so that you can give them to the staff at the veterinary clinic and let them treat your puppy or dog. Upon arriving home, praise your dog for its behavior during the trip and visit. See? That wasn't so bad!

Tips for the overly excited ones:

1. You don't have to worry so much with the car being turned off or sitting idly, but you will want to have another person in the car with you to drive so you can work your dog.
2. Always use soft treats and or a toy that the dog really likes and gets excited about. Start with short trips to the end of the block. Every time your dog starts to react to someone, something, or just the mailboxes going by, get the dog's attention.
3. Pick a word or short phrase that tells the dog something pleasant is going to happen if it focuses on you rather than what is getting him excited. "Leave it" usually works pretty well. Once the dog hears "leave it" and you get his attention on you, give him a treat or show him his toy and let him mouth it, or however he relates to the toy. What we are doing is not only taking the attention off the scary, threatening thing with a phrase, but also teaching them that these things are not going to bother them, and listening to their owner is much more fun.

For really long car rides, you may want to ask your vet if a small dose of Benadryl or some other calming agent can't be used. Don't be afraid to seek a natural solution as well such as Valerian Root or Rescue Remedy.